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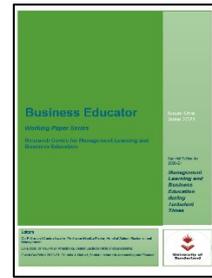
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Defining key factors that influence ‘the student experience’.

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Abstract

Universities, now more than ever, operate in an increasingly challenging environment with students increasingly aware of the importance of a satisfactory university experience. This paper looks to explore the factors that can influence the student experience within an institution using a developed framework based upon Plato’s allegory of the Cave. The rationale for this is that a satisfactory student experience can lead to many benefits for the university, including positive feedback and increased word of mouth reviews. However, if the institution does not meet the needs of their students there is an indication in the literature that shows a poor student experience can lead to negative student perceptions of their university experience. The qualitative methodology applied an interpretivist philosophy and used focus groups to explore the key themes, defined from the conceptual framework, that impacted the student experience. These were deemed to be ‘student expectations’ and ‘student perceptions’. This paper has found that the student experience is directly influenced by these two factors and that students being engaged with the university was a key factor in feeling established within the institution and creating a positive university experience.

Keywords:

University experience

Student expectations

Student perceptions

Student satisfaction

Undergraduate study

Higher education

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Introduction

The concept of the university experience has been widely explored (Douglas et al, 2006; Alves and Raposo, 2010; Meehan and Howells, 2018, El Said, 2021) and key factors which influence the experience defined. These include; the role of academic staff, the student environment created within the university, previous institution experiences of the student and the influence of family and friends amongst others. Once these factors are understood then they may become easier to manage for the institution and increase the likelihood of creating a satisfactory university experience for their students.

This paper will use a developed framework to develop and establish the key factors that influence the student experience received within an HEI. The research collected will show that by understanding the key influencers on the student experience, universities are in a better position to effectively meet the needs of their students and increase the likelihood of a satisfactory experience within the institution.

Literature Review

This paper aims to further investigate previous research undertaken by the author and will be using a conceptual framework developed to explore the key factors of the student experience, see figure 1 below for framework. The research identified that a gap in the literature in relation to the influencers upon pre-university perceptions and how these inform the expectations of the student upon their chosen university. The models and theory explored also failed to identify the key drivers for students' post-university (after Graduation) which is identified by this researcher as being an important factor upon student expectations (Price, 2018). Plato's allegory of the cave was used as the philosophical viewpoint upon which the conceptual framework was based. The key dimensions of the philosophy were used and adapted as a representation on which the framework was built.

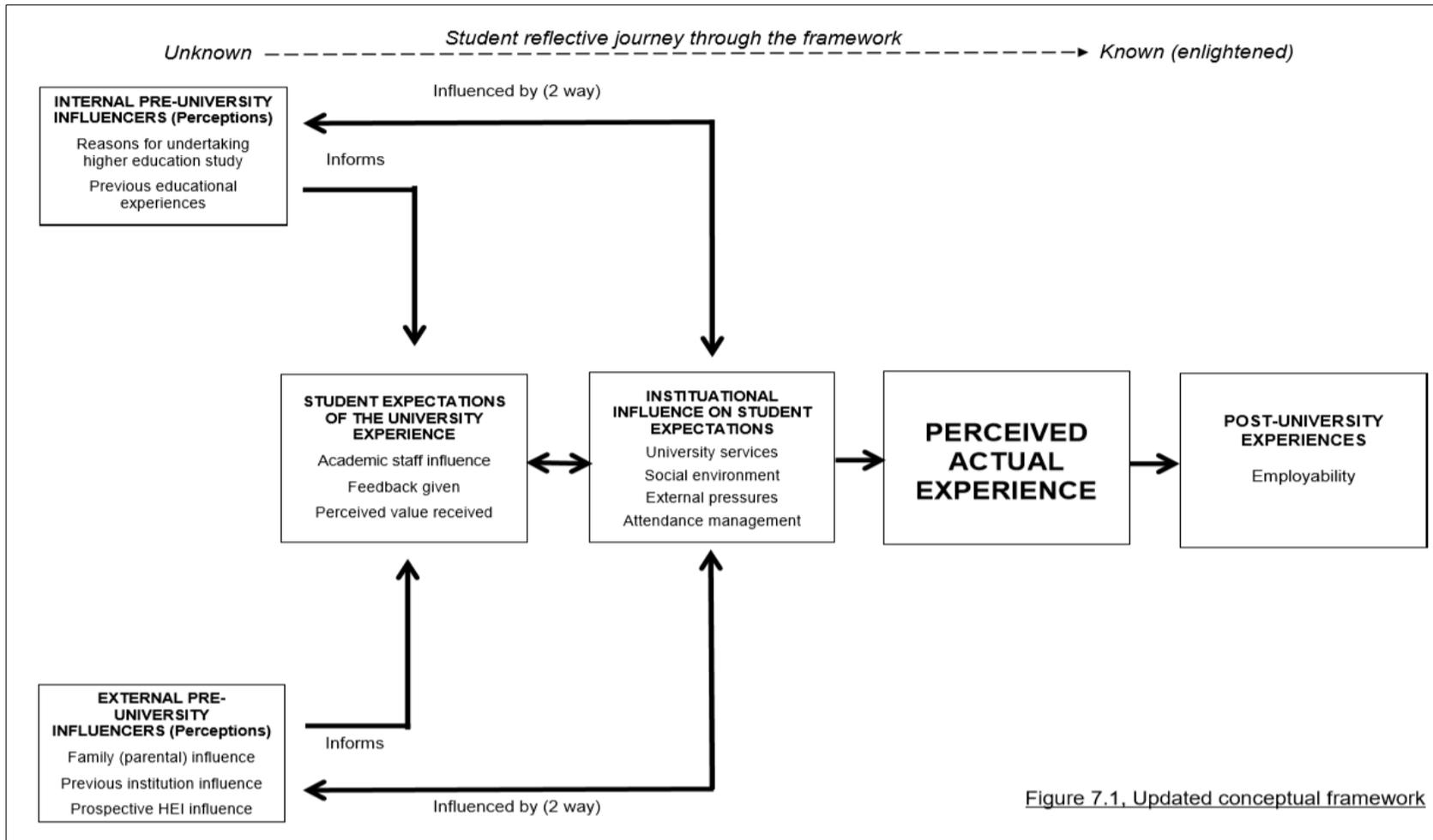


Figure 1, Developed Framework to define influencers of the student experience (Price, 2018)

The framework identified that there are several influences on the student experience, these include; the student experience, quality of service, student perceptions and student expectations (Alves and Raposo, 2010; Latif et al., 2019; Teeroovengadum et al., 2019). For the purpose of this report, the focus will be on two key factors identified as being significant drivers of the university student experience, these being: 'student perception and 'student expectations. This is visualised in figure 2 below.

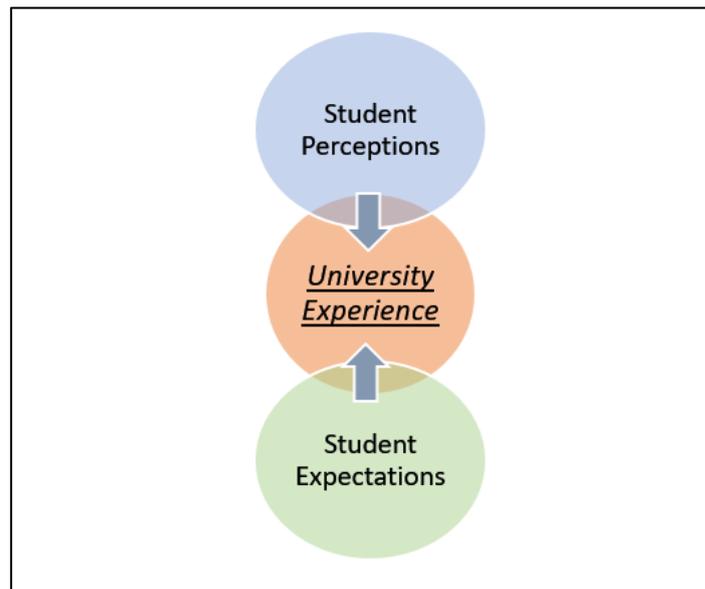


Figure 2, Factors influencing the university experience

Student Perceptions

How student perceive their higher education experience is an important consideration for institutions as it will set a gauge for which experiences are judged, positively or negatively (Tomlinson, 2008). Some researchers deem perception as the influences on students' view in their choice of institution, e.g. this could be academic reputation for some, but location or facilities may be more important for others (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; Nadelson et al., 2013; Redmehr et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2020). The perception of many students is that university study can improve or even guarantee employment after Graduation. Indeed, research by Tomlinson (2008), found that 'higher education credentials were seen as positional

goods and a key dimension of future employability'. This, therefore, supports the view that a university degree will enable a greater number of benefits compared to those who do not attend university i.e. work-related, economic, and social. Thus, the notion of students viewing higher education as an 'investment' for future successes, even if that belief does not have any direct or immediate assurance of employment is valid. For students who had a limited sense of how they might be able to apply their university experiences to the job market, they still had a sense that university will 'lead to something' upon Graduation (Tomlinson, 2017; Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016; Woya, 2019). Scutter et al (2011) underpin this view and found that employability aspirations, not necessarily were seen as the key reason students choose to go to university. This suggests that improving career aspirations were a key driver for enrolling on higher education qualification. Dandridge (2018) identified that students place value on their university experience and rate teaching standards, quality of feedback, good learning resources and securing a good graduate job as the most important factors to them.

Student perceptions are likely to be reinforced by the growing marketisation and changing financial landscape of higher education (Naidoo, 2003; Brown and Carasso, 2013; Mok and Montgomery, 2021). Inevitably, this highly competitive marketplace has led to institutions having to adapt their marketing strategies and has, in some quarters, led to some theorists defining students as customers or as products with the academics being the service providers (Tierney, 1999; Bowden, 2011; Woodall et al, 2014; Guilbault, 2018), a new definition that has not been without criticism and resistance (Svensson and Wood, 2007). In this sense, Barrett (1996) explains that HEI's must adopt and welcome a marketing focus towards their recruitment of students. These comments show that the marketisation of higher education is becoming ever more apparent and as such can be regarded as a business like any other with institutions now becoming aware of the implications of service provision to their students/customers.

The notion of students' preparedness for entering higher education in relation to the learning environment they will enter and the impact this has on their behaviour when at the institution (Heikkilä and Lonka, 2006). Briggs et al. (2012) identify that the student transition from college can bring challenges for the university and that

appropriate relationships need to be developed for students to settle into university life and ultimately succeed as higher education learners. Authors identify the contrast that students experience, in terms of the learning environment, between secondary/further education and higher education (Christie et al., 2006; Gibney et al., 2011; Young et al., 2020). The teaching environment in further education differs from the higher education atmosphere as it tends to be highly supportive and structured in comparison to higher education. This differential in the environment can impact upon the expectations of students when arriving at their HEI and their satisfaction with the provision offered.

The notion of student satisfaction is indeed linked to how their perceptions within the institution are deemed 'to be met' with their educational experience is now considered, by some, to be similar to customer satisfaction within services (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler, 2006). Satisfaction can be defined as a state felt by a person who has experienced performance or an outcome that fulfils their expectations (Krentler and Grundnitski, 2004). When exploring student satisfaction within the higher education sector, authors have defined the topic differently and as such, there is a range of definitions on the subject of student satisfaction and the impact upon the student experience (Athiyaman 1997; Wiers Jenssen et al., 2002; Forrester, 2006; Walker and Palmer, 2011, Chaudhary and Dey, 2020). Student satisfaction refers to the favourability of a student's subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with their education (Oliver, 1989; Elliott and Shin, 2002, Winstone et al., 2021).

The relevance to this in terms of the marketisation of HE is how these are used by students to evaluate their university experience. Indeed, external institutes are increasingly used to draw together the views from students on their institution's performance (Subrahmanyam, 2017). One of the most commonly accepted of these is the National Student Survey (NSS), which gathers opinions from their students about their time at their university (www.thestudentsurvey.com, 2021). The survey is undertaken by students at all UK publicly funded universities to collect satisfaction data (Williams, 2002). The survey collects data on a range of topics that influence the satisfaction of students within a higher education institution and encompasses the whole university experience from the campus facilities to interactions with staff

and peers (Elliott and Shin, 2002; Rowly, 2003). The results of these surveys are often used by prospective students to gauge the institutions' performance, as such, it is the HEI's interest to effectively manage these views.

When exploring a student's journey through their HEI, it is widely accepted that the first year of study is viewed as critical in ensuring that students engage with their programme of study and are successful in achievement (Trotter and Roberts, 2006). Byrne and Flood (2005) explored the perceptions of students at the beginning of their higher education studies and identified that those with positive preceding academic performance related to a confident progression to their HEI. As such this paper will predominately explore this from a first-year perspective but will also look at how this relates to the 'student journey' through their university experience by also exploring years two and three.

Student Expectations

Many studies have examined student expectations within higher education (Gedye et al., 2004; Longden, 2006; Crisp and Cruz, 2009; Bates and Kaye, 2014). Marshall and Linder (2005) analysed students' expectations of teaching in HEI's and defined that a range of different expectations exists. These findings show there is a mixed understanding among students of their expectations and understandings of the role of the institution in their studies. As such, analysis of student expectations is an important consideration for HEI's (Hill, 1995; Sander et al., 2000). Students' when first entering the higher education environment can often have unrealistic expectations of their expected university experience and as such may influence the perception of the experience they expect to receive. Hill (1995) identifies that student expectations in academic characteristics of their higher education provision, such as quality of teaching and methods, have remained relatively stable over time. As such it is a case of informing and educating students of this in order that they are as aware as possible of institutional behaviours. Studies (Rodie and Kleine, 2000) have demonstrated the positive impact of managing expectations and identifying key variables such as participation, role clarity, and motivation to participate in the student experience (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2000).

Student expectations are constantly evolving, and the ongoing global pandemic is a good example of how this has only been heightened (Aucejo, 2020). For example, HEI's have had to adapt to an online approach to teaching during the pandemic and as such many will continue with a blended learning approach moving forward. As such, students' expectations of their programme offering may differ and therefore institutions will need to carefully manage this to ensure the student experience is satisfactory (Suleri, 2020). Thus, it can be seen that there is a relationship between students' expectations and their satisfaction within the intuition, and as such, this report will look to explore this relationship further.

Another consideration when exploring student expectations is in relation to their personal motivators for studying a higher education programme and how this influences their expectations of the institution. Extrinsic motivations, such as career opportunities upon Graduation and intrinsic motivators such as academic reasons i.e. programme /subject challenge, are often seen as key factors in students' motivation to go to university. Rawson (2000) identifies that an important outcome of the higher education process for the great majority of participants in the achievement of a recognised qualification. De Lange and Mavondo (2004) state that some students are motivated by the notion of intellectual growth as opposed to directing linking to financial reward through career advancement. Other motivations relate to the influence of parents, social factors and occupational motives (Byrne and Flood, 2005; Christie et al., 2006; Chavan and Carter, 2018). Further research recognises that the initial motivator for participation in higher education has a direct influence on how students subsequently behave at university (Gibney et al., 2011; Hassel and Ridout, 2018).

This section has explored some factors which influence the university experience based upon two chosen key drivers of perception and expectation. The literature debated the key influencers upon student expectations including teaching and support staff, academic performance and personal development. Literature relating to student perception identified that rationale for the choice of the institution was varied and was influenced by many factors. Employability post-graduation was deemed to be a key for HE studies, and debate explored if there should be an automatic assumption that university leads to a higher paid job upon Graduation.

The agreement within the research did clearly show that there is a direct link between student satisfaction and the experience they have within the institution (DeShields, 2005; Douglas et al, 2006; Kanwar, 2021).

Methodology and Method

Some significant considerations in relation to the student experience have been explored in the literature review of this paper. As such having defined these topics it is important to establish the context of the key factors, 'student perceptions' and 'student expectations', in relation to the student experience. In order to identify the most appropriate method of data collection for the paper, it was important to define the best approach to apply. It was acknowledged that a qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate technique. Qualitative research stresses the relationship between the researcher and what is studied, it is interested in the process. Whereas quantitative research emphasises measurement and is interested in the relationship between variables (Palinkas et al., 2015). It is identified that there are suitable methods that can be used in qualitative research which include; in-depth interviews and focus group as well as participant observation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Silverman, 2020). Samples sizes should be small and purposeful to give meaningful data that should be used to provide important information and not just because they are representative of a large number of the sample (Sale et al, 2002). The qualitative method is seen to be more flexible and allowing respondents the opportunity to express experiences in their own terms and context (Saunders et al., 2016).

The most appropriate qualitative method identified for this research was the use of semi-structured focus group interviews. The rationale for this was that the researcher was able to use the discussions in the focus groups to examine the literature findings in further detail with student participants. Alongside this, it enabled the researcher to establish focus group participants thoughts and feelings towards the factors that influence their experience within a higher education institution. Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data. They are generally loosely

structured and encourage interactive discussion between small groups of respondents simultaneously (Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger, 2014). Typically, a focus group will contain from four to eight people, a moderator will lead the group in an in-depth discussion on one or more particular topics in order to explore participants preferences and choices, as they explore why people feel, think or act in a specific manner (Kitzinger, 1994; Cameron, 2005). The rationale to use focus groups for this research was to capture qualitative data via a smaller sample of participants' i.e. undergraduate students at a UK HEI. Furthermore, the rationale for the use of this qualitative data collection technique was to give the researcher the opportunity to discuss and probe key themes in greater detail that was identified in the literature review findings. Focus group interviews are an efficient qualitative method that is used to discover the 'why' behind the 'what' in participant perspectives (Morgan, 1996). The focus group helped the researcher to address and further understand the two key factors, 'student satisfaction' and 'student expectations', identified in influencing the student experience.

The objective of the focus group research was to identify, explore and discuss student participant's opinions on the influences of their university experience. the focus groups were categorised by level of study, encompassing students at years 1, 2 and 3 of their undergraduate degree programme at a UK HEI. To gain a suitable sample for the focus group, the researcher distributed a document asking for volunteers to an appropriate sample population. This being students who were studying on a Business-related programme at a UK HEI, the population group totalled a possible 176 respondents across 3-year groups at the institution. Creswell and Clark (2011) also suggest the importance of acquiring participants who will be willing to openly and honestly share information or 'their views/opinions' and conduct the research in situations where participants are in a comfortable environment.

From this, 24 students showed interest in being part of the focus groups, however, after identifying dates to undertake the interviews this number was confirmed at 17. This number was initially to be 19 with an additional two 3rd year students due to participate but unfortunately due to unforeseen circumstances, they were unable to attend. As such the focus group was confirmed as 17 students across the 3 years of

undergraduate study, these encompassed 7 students from years 1, 6 students from year 2 and 4 students from year 3. All participants were made up of students from a range of Business and Management programmes within the HEI, see table 1.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Time studied at the HEI	8 Months	16 Months	24 Months
Group size	7	6	4

Table 1 – Focus group participant details

All focus groups took place in April, this month was chosen as it was towards the end of the students second semester of the academic year, thus allowing the researcher the opportunity to identify how key themes had developed over that academic year. The responses of the 17 participants in the focus groups were used to explore in greater depth the opinions and attitudes towards their undergraduate student experience based across their three-year period with the institution. Each participant was coded as shown in table 2 to distinguish between the student contributor and year of study.

Participant	Focus Group - Year 1	Focus Group - Year 2	Focus Group - Year 3
Female 1	F1F1	F2F1	F3F1
Female 2	F1F2	F2F2	
Female 3	F1F3	F2F3	
Female 4	F1F4		
Male 1	F1M1	F2M1	F3M1
Male 2	F1M2	F2M2	F3M2
Male 3	F1M3	F2M3	F3M3

Table 2, Breakdown of focus group participants

The focus group interview themes were derived from key themes raised in the literature review of this paper, see table 3 below.

Focus Group Theme	Theme Driver	Driver Overview	Theorist	Question Themes
<i>Student Perceptions</i>	University increases employability	The consensus that attending an HEI will guarantee / greatly increase the likelihood of gaining employment upon Graduation.	2011; Scutter et al (2011); Tomlinson (2017); Redmehr et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2020	Perceptions versus actual experience Thought process to deciding upon the institution Influencers – friends /teachers/ university Feelings towards university prior to starting Personal motivators for studying
	Students are fully prepared for higher education	Student 'preparedness' for HE, influencers were identified as important factors.	Hill et al, (2003); Boyd et al, 2006; Barnes et al (2010); Mah and Ifenthaler (2018)	
	The marketisation of higher education	The notion that students are customers in their university experience	Naidoo, 2003; Brown and Carasso, 2013: Mok and Montgomery, 2021	
<i>Student Expectations</i>	Expectations of the institution	Focus on teaching standards, staff access as well as wider support services	Marshall and Linder (2005); Telford and Masson (2005); Longden, 2006; Lenton (2015); Latif et al., 2019	Staff influence University Facilities Student Engagement Expectations versus actual experience Personal motivators for studying Concept of Value
	Expectations of value	How students value the service they receive from the HEI, e.g. impact of tuition fees on their expectations of value	Jackson et al. (2000); Nilsen (2009); Fredrickson (2012); Dandridge (2018); Teeroovengadum et al., 2019	
	Personal Motivators	Individual influencers on each student, internal and external motivators	Fazey and Fazey (2001); Byrne and Flood (2005); Christie et al., (2006); Hassel and Ridout, 2018	
	Previous Experiences	How past experiences have impacted upon the student's expectations of their HEI	Hill (1995); Sander et al. (2000); Heikkilä and Lonka (2006); Briggs et al. (2012); Young et al., (2020)	

Table 3, Focus group interview themes and key literature

After the focus groups had taken place, the discussions were written up and analysed through the computer software package NVivo where it was collected, organised and analysed. NVivo is designed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data through recording, sorting, matching and linking key themes in order to gather information to assist in answering the research question (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). The researcher will explore these themes in further detail in the findings and discussions section of this paper.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the qualitative analysis showed that students derive their experiences based upon their experiences. That is, they make a judgement based upon the actual experience received to define how satisfactory this is to them. The findings from the analysis identified these factors to include 'academic staff influence' and 'feedback given'. Comments from the focus group identified there was an increased expectation upon academic staff in relation to their response to student needs, including feedback, contact time and staff personality.

"I think the main thing for me was the teacher and lecturers. How much they would help you and how much time they would give you, whether they would be approachable things like that. That was my main concern..." (F1F2).

This is interesting and shows that when initially entering higher education students feel that there is a gap in their knowledge as to expectations from the university and perhaps clear information has not been given to them prior to arrival at the institution. Expectations of the teaching experience is a key area identified and as such where expectations do not always match the actual experience received problems may develop (Brinkworth et al., 2009).

The research also identified that staff engagement was a significant influencer upon the university experience and as such is a fundamental part of the student experience delivered. Participants in the focus group expressed a strong emotion that the interaction they had with academic staff within the institution positively or negatively impacted upon their experience.

“Lecturers they are really open, and they give you as much as they can. They support [you]” (F1M2).

“I think that you can talk with your tutor, about the assignment and other points” (F1M1).

“With the support from the teachers. Sometimes when I’m struggling, I can get private time with your tutor to explain how to get things done to get through. So yes, I’m satisfied” (F1F3).

These responses support the concept of tutor support and how it can enhance their academic performance and overall satisfaction within the institution. It has been identified that the most important factor related to learning was if students felt they had received a valuable teaching experience (Marks et al., 2016). Therefore, it could be argued that the university indulges these needs and ensures that student expectations regarding tutor support are met. However as identified by Emery et al. (2001), this could create the wrong culture within the institution whereby academic staff feel pressurised into adopting a ‘customer-orientated’ approach to their role. The quote below shows that expectations of students can rise and as such, it is important that the communication is clear to students in order that standards are met.

“There’s been so many times you’re in a for a 2-hour thing and you get sent away for an hour to do a presentation and you just spend your time listening to other people saying the stuff you’ve just said and not getting anything from the person.and then you go into the seminar, they give you a speech for 10 minutes and then send you away you come back and you speak to them. I’d rather get for 2 hours; you are throwing stuff at me” (F2M2).

The dynamics of the student-tutor relationship is paramount to the achievement of a successful ‘working’ relationship but it is also important to ensure there is a leading figure in the relationship, Helms and Key (1994) argues this should be the academic staff member rather than the student. If an academic staff / the university adopt an approach that the ‘student is always right’ this may increase student satisfaction but may increase the notion of students being more entitled to pass their course and receive good grades even if undeserved (Svensson and Wood, 2007). The findings

of this research identify that although there are demands made by the students on the institution, there is not a correlation to their expectations on passing the programme. It was identified by students that they believed they were responsible for their own learning and that it was not the obligation of the university to 'give them' their degree qualification.

"I think customer is probably the wrong term because if you go into a shop and you're a customer you get stuff done for you. As a student, you've got to do so much for yourself. I wouldn't say customer was the right word" (F3M2).

"You're the one doing the work whereas when you're a customer you're paying someone else to do the work" (FSM1).

Sharrock (2000) supports these findings and identifies students should not be given their education but instead must actively coproduce it. The role of staff should be to challenge student's thinking and engage them with the knowledge to assist their learning. Participants identified a range of emotions on their expectations for their programme, several participants offered concern about what to expect, see below. Bui (2002) identifies that students attending HEI for the first time can be underprepared or fearsome of the experience they are about to undertake.

"...so many things in my head like what is the teaching style going to be like, what're the students going to be like? Are the exams going to be hard compared to here [previous institution]? You know all these different things...so there are a lot of you know doubts and uncertainties..." (F1F4).

"I think the main thing for me was the teacher and lecturers. How much they would help you and how much time they would give you, whether they would be approachable things like that. That was my main concern..." (F1F3).

This is interesting and shows that when initially entering higher education students feel that there is a gap in their knowledge as to expectations from the university and perhaps clear information has not been given in relation to their expectations.

The research findings have also identified the importance of feedback that is given to students from academic staff. The research identified that feedback and tutor

comments regarding their studies are important to their learning experience. The expectation of high-quality feedback, therefore, relates to a satisfactory university experience, if the feedback expectation is not met by academic staff then a negative correlation to the overall experience at the institution will be given. This is supported by student comments from the focus groups shown below:

“Feedback is very important. Cos if you know what you have done wrong next time you don’t do it and you improve the point” (F3M3).

“Last semester, I hadn’t got a clue [with an assignment] for a while. I didn’t have a problem asking [some lecturers] after class. I’d ask them in class to give a brief answer and give me some good advice which I appreciated.” (F1F3).

“The first assignment we handed in we had, we didn’t get any feedback and now the next assignment is next week so we would have like the feedback maybe we resubmit our last assignment before we get the feedback. This wasn’t very helpful to me...” (F1M1).

Summary of Findings

In the first year of study within the university, it was recognised that students were seen to have many concerns and uncertainties regarding the experience they were to receive at the institution. The focus group results have shown that students have several drivers that impact upon the student experience within an institution. The two themes identified in this paper have explored influencers that impact upon their first year of study at the university. One such influencer that participants acknowledged was a staff and their approach to teaching. Therefore, the role of staff in managing these apprehensions and creating value becomes critically important, a consistent approach and message will guide students to the service standards delivered by the institution. It was found that an inconsistent approach by the institution can lead to a negative student experience (Kuh et al., 2007; Trowler 2010). This was found to be true in this research where students identified that their experience was defined by their expectations and experiences within the institution.

A final theme that came from the focus groups was that of employability and how this was identified as a significant motivator for students when deciding upon their choice to study at a higher education institution. Students identified that they believed studying at university was imperative when it came to future career prospects upon Graduation. Tomlinson (2008) found that possessing some form of higher education credential was recognised as a key consideration for students as it is a key indicator for their future employability.

“I think now it’s quite essential to have a degree, to get a decent job. Everyone does so if you don’t...” (F2F3).

“Nowadays you have to have a degree. I don’t think a degree is essential to succeed, however, it is more difficult to achieve something without a degree” (F2M1).

“I have come to university to get a job when I graduate; I think this is really important for my future” (F1F1).

Conclusion

It has been identified that the student experience is directly influenced by factors within the institution and that student expectations and satisfaction are impacted by these. This was especially true of their views on engagement with university staff and how this impacted upon their experiences and satisfaction within the institution. As such the ability of the HEI to manage these factors will be of benefit to them, not just in improving the student experience but also in additional benefits such as positive feedback from students, better developed relationships and increased understanding of their students.

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